

Kate Manheim: 'I Don't Need No Teacher'

By Ellen Rapp

"Come," said Kate Manheim, leading me on a tour of the Wooster Street loft, so huge it requires two buzzers. She led me past the large fake lobster in one room, the oversized swing in another, and in yet another room, director-playwright Richard Foreman, clad in a terry-cloth bathrobe, with whom she has shared the loft for 11 years. A quick hello to Richard, and Kate heads us toward the kitchen, where a plastic bat perches on a wall near racks of tea and spices, and long rubber snakes dangle on a hanger from the ceiling.

The spookhouse touches remind me of the punkily ghoulish set of *Egyptology*—Foreman's latest New York production. Manheim, of course, played the leading role, and delivered a haunting performance as the "lady aviator" mysteriously stranded in a land that may or may not be Egypt.

Of the 23 plays Foreman has written, Kate Manheim has appeared in 20 since she joined his "Ontological-Hysteric" Theatre in 1971. Her career and personal life are linked so closely with Foreman's that Manheim has been tagged everything from his muse and collaborator (she's not) to his oracle of the female consciousness. Several years ago, in the *Soho News*, one journalist described her as "the Alice in Wonderland of Foreman's 'ontological-hysterical' world."

Naturally, this has its drawbacks. Manheim, who once said, "I really wouldn't want to be in plays apart from Richard's," is now saying she'd welcome the chance to perform in other people's works. The problem is, nobody's asked her. "People are so used to my working with Richard, they're afraid I'll say no." And Richard? "I think he'd be delighted to see me do other stuff."

What may inhibit others from casting Kate Manheim, however, is not just fear of her refusal or of the wrath of Foreman; it's a reluctance to gamble with the unknown. Aside from a few small television roles years ago in France (where some friends got her work at "the good television station"), Manheim, now 38, has never appeared in a production that wasn't somehow connected with Foreman. And the stage persona that has made her such a vital part of Foreman's bizarre, fragmented plays—noted, for one thing, for their absence of characterization—has also led some people to label her a one-note performer, incapable of more conventional acting. Critic John Simon, for instance, of whom Simon says she is fond, refers to her performing style as "a non-stop whine." "Some people think I'm inadequate," she says philosophically. "They really hate what I do."

Then there are those fans and critics who are less taken with what Manheim does on stage than the way she looks doing it. Her face is soft and vulnerably pretty beneath a scrambled halo of platinum hair—the chic new look she sported in *Egyptology*. Unlike many beautiful women, who feel uncomfortably conspicuous, Manheim seems relaxed about her good looks. Nor has she ever felt exploited about baring her body—which is trim and voluptuous—in past Foreman productions. But in recent plays, Kate Manheim has been keeping her clothes on—her own decision. "Now I want people to see other parts of me," she says, without any apparent irony.

Not that she hasn't achieved recognition on her own merit: several critics have praised Manheim's presence in some of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre's more recent productions. And her performance of the title role in *Rhoda in Potatoland* won her an Obie award in 1976.

Might she have garnered such acclaim had she never met Foreman? Kate doubts it—and she's surprisingly frank about what her life would be like without him. The woman who "told" me, "I always wanted to act," said in nearly the same



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breath, "If I hadn't met Richard, I don't think I'd be an actress now."

When Kate Manheim met Richard Foreman, she was 26 and working as a film librarian at the Public Theater. Until then, her life had not been terribly focused. Born in the Bronx, Kate was shuttled off to France at the age of five, along with her sister and parents (her father, Ralph Manheim, is the celebrated translator of Celine, Brecht, Heidegger, and Freud, among others). Unable to fulfill her dream of becoming a child actress ("my parents said I had to go to school"), Kate later attended a traditional acting school for several months, but "got so depressed I had to stop." She returned to the United States in 1969 and got a job teaching French and English at Berlitz, followed by a brief stint in the accounting department of a student exchange organization. Since her arrival in New York City, she had not pursued her acting career.

Then one day in 1971, Richard Foreman, then 33, walked into the Public Theater's Anthology Film Archives, looking for people to cast in his fourth play, *Hotel China*. He saw Manheim and shyly approached her, asking, "Would you mind being an angel in my play?" She said no, she wouldn't mind. "Would you mind starting tonight?" Instead, she started the next night, playing the angel as well as a character called Hannah.

How did Foreman strike her at that first meeting? "Mysterious," Kate said emphatically, widening her blue-shaded eyes at the memory. "I was completely taken by Richard and by the whole process." Though she kept her library job for the next few years, rehearsing and performing in the evenings, Manheim's life had been transformed.

Whether through modesty or reticence, Manheim is less forthcoming about her influence on his career, which has been considerable—recently perhaps more than ever. Fans of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre consider Kate Manheim's stage persona as indispensable to the productions as the script, staging, sound effects, and stage design that Foreman so assiduously controls. Which raises the question: in Foreman's tight theatrical unit (some would say dictatorship), where actors are given little more leeway than deckhands, how has Manheim come to emerge as his star player?

At first, Manheim herself doesn't seem to have a clear answer. She takes a few drags on the cigarette in its amber holder, adjusts the dusky pink fabric of her smocklike housedress, and says, "A lot of other actors think that Richard and I are a team. It's not like that at all. People seem to think I'm in this really privileged situation."

But doesn't a decade of living with her director help prepare Kate for her roles, give her added insight into ways to perform them? Apparently not. For one thing, Manheim never sees any of the scripts until the other actors do—at first rehearsal. Until then, she says, she never even peeks at what's in the typewriter. The only exceptions have been the four times she and a friend have translated Foreman's plays for French productions, in which Kate also performs. (Her decision to act as translator has less to do with her father's influence than with having spent half her life in France.)

And in her approach to acting, Manheim receives no special coaching from the playwright-director. "I don't completely understand what Richard writes," she admits. "It's always been a mystery to

me. So the only thing I can rely on is myself and whatever comes out in me when I do these performances. In the process of having to perform lines I don't necessarily believe, I have to find a way to make them my own."

Manheim possesses the rare ability to embody Foreman's vision of the world, never attempting to change it, but instead shaping herself around it until it becomes, in a sense, her world too. It's this, I think, more than anything else, that has made her the essential performer in Foreman's productions.

Does Manheim consider herself essential? "We'd have to see about that one day," she answers coyly, "if Richard ever wrote a play without me." Her face crinkles into a smile until she's almost winking. Then she says, "Though he'd claim that there's a continuity, most people see Richard's plays as being rather disconnected. And I think most actors would rather connect, have a coherence to the performance. But to me it's interesting to seem disconnected."

Don't Foreman's other actors do that as well? "They do it, but I have a feeling they don't take it very seriously. They're not able to make it seem like life and death—like it's absolutely necessary." In *Egyptology*, the Foreman play that Manheim says she "had the least grasp on," her disoriented, slightly-drugged delivery gave just the right edge of anomie to lines like, "I entered the pain club through the back door" and "every time I telephone someone, he's dead."

The suggestion of some of her detractors—and admirers—that Manheim is not acting in any of her roles does not offend Kate. "All the roles are me," she says, although it seems a peculiar way to describe something that initially makes

little or no sense to her.

The plays themselves, says Kate, are "very personal, very autobiographical—about Richard, and our life together." In a past interview, Manheim described their personal union as a "normal relationship," with all the occasional "tantrums and terrible crises" that befall any long-time couple. It's this darker side that's emphasized—and parodied—by Foreman. In one telling and funny sequence in *Egyptology*, the principal male and female characters faced off and baited each other, circling like animals about to spring. Tension built until they simultaneously raised their fists and snarled, "Give me a kiss."

In *Egyptology*, as in many of Foreman's other plays, the leading male role and alter-ego was a sarcastic, often pretentious observer, obsessed with his intellectual prowess, given to using intelligence as a weapon. Naturally, his foil was Manheim.

Man: Look, I attacked what I attacked with my mental processes. I didn't have to use my fists.

Woman: But you think too much.

Does this kind of interchange often occur offstage? "All the time," Kate sighs. "It's the story of our lives." If Foreman didn't also possess a humorous perspective on his own self-importance, the ability to mock what he calls his "rarefied artistic pretensions" (also mocked in the plays), Manheim concedes that life with him might be near-intolerable. And as much as Foreman's tendency to center on himself may exasperate her, she realizes she could probably use a little of that herself.

"Our relationship is the classic man-woman thing," she says. "It's far easier for Richard to shut himself off and live in his plays, his reading—whatever he does—than it is for me. Sometimes, though, when I'm alone, I'll get myself together and paint" (the colorful frescoes in geometric patterns, framing a window in the room where we sit, were done by Kate). And in Paris, several months ago, where she was performing in Gertrude Stein's "Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights in Paris" (directed by Foreman), Manheim started writing a "sort of strange autobiography" in French, still her preferred language. Since then, she has not done any work on it.

But if Manheim hasn't been able to successfully harness her mental energy to individual creative pursuits, her influence in other areas—namely, Foreman's Onological-Hysterical Theatre—has

positively invigorating. "What's interesting is that she brought to my work something I would have rejected," said Foreman in a recent interview. "She came to America and got hooked on all these television serials that I would never deign to watch. She loved *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* and so forth, and the injection of that kind of energy into my pretensions of rarefied intellectual art has been tremendously healthy."

He also attributes to Manheim another kind of change in his plays: they have grown more emotional, less cerebral. Characters react and respond to each other more than they did in his earlier plays.

"I couldn't have kept playing in his plays if they'd remained as static as they were in the beginning," says Kate, referring to an unusual staging technique once employed by Foreman. For years, he recorded all his actors' lines on tape prior to the performance, and then ran the tape while they stood onstage. Though the actors might repeat key words, there was virtually no live dialogue. Kate helped change that; "I felt I wanted to talk," she said with a disarming grin.

Perhaps her wanting to talk will extend to other parts of her life. Though Manheim doesn't shun publicity, she admits "I feel I have nothing to say." But as an actress she's evolving: her role—"an old spinster-type" (l)—in *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights* represented a milestone. "It was the first time I did any kind of characterization," she said, gleefully adding, "A lot of my best friends didn't recognize me."

The week after *Egyptology* closed, Kate and Richard left for Paris, where his new play, *La Robe de Chambre de George Bataille*, opened in July. Manheim had already translated the work, but had yet to find out what part she would play. Four months later, it's off to Rotterdam for the debut of *Birth of a Poet*, a rock opera Foreman will direct, in which Manheim will play a whore.

I felt encouraged to hear that Manheim wants to become a more flexible performer, and that Foreman apparently would like to see that too. While the presence of Foreman is all-pervasive, I like to think of Manheim maintaining the same good-humored spunk she showed in *Rhoda in Potatoland*:

Max: What I want to give you is . . . an estimable shape. The imagination of a . . .

Rhoda: Teacher? I don't need no teacher. ■

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